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ABSTRACT

A writing-across-the-curriculum program has been initiated at the East Campus of Pima Community College in an effort to improve student literacy. The program operates in the following manner: (1) faculty in all disciplines on campus are asked to get involved in the program, those who participate being paid a one-time fee of $100 for their efforts; (2) participating faculty develop a writing assignment which meets prescribed criteria, such as proper formatting, acceptable documentation, and correct language usage; (3) students complete the assignment and submit their paper to the course instructor; (4) the course instructor submits the papers to a "Collateral Grader," a writing instructor who grades the papers for mechanics; (5) the "Collateral Grader" marks all detected errors in each paper and makes an overall evaluation indicating that the paper passes or must be rewritten; (6) the course instructor grades the passing papers for content and determines the course grade; and (7) participating faculty evaluate the process at the end of the course. The use of the "Collateral Grader" has several advantages; e.g., students receive writing feedback from an instructor who has the skills to effectively grade grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage; awareness of the need for campus-wide writing standards is generated; and student-teacher negotiation concerning the importance of writing skills is reduced. Survey results show positive responses from both students and faculty. (LAL)

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WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: ONE SMALL STEP

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WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: ONE SMALL STEP

Illiteracy has been detected at Pima Community College. Actually, illiteracy can be found on college campuses across the country. To put it simply, students everywhere have failed to master sufficient reading or writing skills to enable them to succeed in the classroom, on the job--anywhere.

The problem will not be eradicated overnight, if ever. At the East Campus of Pima Community College, one small step is being taken in an effort to improve student literacy. That small step is in the form of a writing-across-the-curriculum program.

Writing-across-the-curriculum programs are springing up in colleges in all 50 states. The Pima East program has a novel twist which produces some unique benefits. The program works in the following manner:

1. Faculty in all disciplines on campus are asked to get involved in the program. Those who do are paid a one-time fee of $100.00 for their efforts. That token compensation has proven to be an effective motivator. It is a signal to the faculty that the college believes in the program. It is also an acknowledgement that work is involved for the faculty member.

2. Faculty involved in the program are asked to develop a writing assignment which meets certain prescribed criteria. These criteria define such matters as proper formatting, acceptable documentation, and correct usage with respect to the organization and development of ideas, spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

3. Students complete the assignment and submit their papers to the course instructor, who in turn submits the papers to a professional "Collateral Grader." The Collateral Grader, a faculty member from the campus writing department who is paid on an hourly basis for grading the papers for mechanics, grades the paper according to the specified criteria. The Grader marks all detected errors and makes an overall evaluation of the paper. The paper either passes or must be rewritten.

4. The papers are now returned to the instructor of the course. Those papers which pass the Collateral Grader are then graded by the instructor for content. Those papers which do not pass the Collateral Grader are returned to the student to be corrected, retyped, and resubmitted for collateral grading. In some cases the process of revision involves finding a dictionary. In other cases the process requires locating a grammar book. In still other cases it involves seeking assistance in the campus tutorial laboratory. In any event, the rewritten paper must go through the same process of evaluation by a Collateral Grader and eventual evaluation by the instructor for the course. It is the content grade which ultimately determines the grade for the course.

5. At the end of the course, a survey instrument is distributed to all faculty who participated in the program. The results of the survey lead to continued refinements of the program as it evolves.

The unique feature of this writing-across-the-curriculum program is the use of a professional Collateral Grader. This feature has several advantages. First, we have discovered that far too many subject matter instructors lack the required skills to effectively grade grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage. Indeed, many faculty members are products of educational systems which put too little emphasis on writing skills. The Collateral Grader, therefore, provides important writing feedback to students.

Second, the use of a Collateral Grader has generated an awareness of the need for campus-wide writing standards. Many instructors, for instance, have attempted to grade composition quality. Others have ignored mechanical aspects, contending that only content is important. Such attitudes, mixed and divided as these are, send the wrong signal to students.

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Third, the program forces those students who write poorly to rewrite their papers. Significant learning takes place in the rewriting process; students are less likely to repeat the same errors again and again if they have been forced to rewrite and correct past errors.

Fourth, the program reduces student-teacher negotiation concerning the importance of writing skills. When the pass/rewrite evaluation is assigned by an outside professional grader, it serves little purpose for the student to debate with the instructor about whether or not the paper meets acceptable compositional standards. It also means that the instructor, who knows all of the students well, can retain objectivity in his/her grading without being influenced by students who "work their hearts out." This objectivity does not let these students "slide by" regardless of the quality of their writing.

The writing-across-the-curriculum program has had an impact on the East Campus of Pima Community College which extends beyond the classes that are participating directly in the program. English and writing instructors praise the program because it makes all of their instruction more relevant to campus curricula. As one composition instructor stated, "Students take my composition course more seriously because they realize that the skills they are learning in this class will be useful in other courses on the campus." In addition, some content-area instructors have assigned writing in their classes despite the fact that they are not directly involved in the writing-across-the-curriculum program. Some of those instructors report that the quality of these written assignments has improved even though the papers are not being graded by the Collateral Grader. The writing-across-the-curriculum program has placed a new emphasis on writing which transcends the boundaries of the program itself.

Survey results indicate that participating faculty and students are favorably impressed with the program. On a five-point scale, all faculty involved evaluated the program as good or outstanding (4 or 5). Students found that the program helped them identify their writing problems, helped them improve their writing skills, and assisted them in learning course content. On a ten-point rating scale, sixty-five percent of the responding students rated the overall success of the program in the top 4 points.

The writing-across-the-curriculum program at Pima East is still growing and evolving. True, illiteracy has not been stamped out, but the value of literacy has been proclaimed. Consistent expectations are being created, and there is reason to believe that Pima students will be more successful in the outside world.

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and

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For further information, contact the authors.

"...BUT IF YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO SPELL THE WORD, HOW CAN YOU FIND IT IN THE DICTIONARY?..."
ARE YOU SURE EVELYN WOOD GOT STARTED THIS WAY?

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor
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